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Barnes listens to father, finds niche by Bobby Harrison/NEMS Daily Journal

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Rusty Barnes, who grew up in Corinth and worked his first job in law enforcement for the Alcorn County Sheriff's Department, is the new Mississippi Homeland Security director. (Courtesy)

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JACKSON – When Rusty Barnes was at Northeast Mississippi Community College in the 1980s where he played free safety on the school's football team, he told his father he could not see himself getting up every morning, going to work and sitting behind a desk.

Leon Barnes, who worked for 35 years on the railroad, told his son it would be hard for him to follow in his and his grandfather's footsteps and get a job with a railroad, but there were always jobs in the health and legal fields.

Barnes chose law enforcement.

The 48-year-old Barnes will spend some time sitting behind a desk in his new job as the director of the Mississippi Office of Homeland Security. He was appointed in early May by Gov. Phil Bryant and Public Safety Commissioner Albert Santa Cruz.

But as Barnes sat behind his desk recently at the Homeland Security headquarters in Jackson, not a suit coat but a bulletproof vest hangs in the corner of his office.

"I didn't take this position to retire," said Barnes.

After finishing at Northeast, Barnes enrolled at the University of Mississippi. While obtaining his

degree, he was employed by the Alcorn County Sheriff's Office in his hometown of Corinth.

After about 18 months there, he entered the state Highway Patrol trooper training school. He first worked in the Morton District. He then worked security details, first for Gov. Ray Mabus and later for Lt. Gov. Ronnie Musgrove and as head of security during Musgrove's tenure as governor.

He also worked as a criminal investigator for the Mississippi Bureau of Investigation.

"The Highway Patrol has been good for him," said Leon Barnes, of Tupelo. "We have never worried too much about him. He has always been able to take care of himself. Plus, after the training the troopers receive, they know how to take care of themselves."

David Huggins, also an Alcorn County native and now the lead criminal investigator for the state Auditor's office, served as head of the Highway Patrol when Barnes was selected to serve on Mabus' security detail.

Huggins, who also served as commissioner of Public Safety, said he had known the Barnes family for years and was impressed with Rusty Barnes' abilities.

"I like to think I mentored him," said Huggins, adding that his background makes him qualified to interact with local law enforcement and first responders.

"His experience positions him well to understand Homeland Security," Huggins said. "...I think the governor and the commissioner did a good job in selecting Rusty."

#### CREATED AFTER 9/11

The state office of Homeland Security was created after the Sept. 11, 2001, World Trade Center attacks. The 15-person department has numerous duties, such as doling out \$20 million in federal grants to local law enforcement and first responders for equipment and training, providing training, assisting with multiple jurisdictional cases and dealing with potential cases of terrorism.

An expert from the office worked with the FBI and local law enforcement on the recent ricin letters case in Tupelo.

At one point, it looked as though Barnes' career in law enforcement might be over. He was diagnosed with leukemia and was in a life-threatening situation before he received a bone marrow transplant in December 2011 from an unidentified donor. After a two-year period, the donor has the option to reveal his identity or remain anonymous.

"My family wants to know who it is and thank the person. I do too, but how do you adequately thank someone who saved your life?"

Barnes said he continues to grow stronger.

"I am getting stronger every day," he said. "...I tell people my family did all the hard work. All I did was live. But it definitely changes your views on life and the order of importance of things."

Barnes is married to the former Carol Johnson of Wheeler, who teaches kinesiology at Mississippi College. They have two girls, ages 21 and 14.

He says he's tried to shield his family from his more harrowing experiences in law enforcement.

"I have two daughters," Barnes said. "I don't want them to hear about those things. There are some bad things you can see. My daddy told me to leave my work at the door when I come home. I try to do that."

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